

Community Asset Mapping: Engaging Youth with their Environment

Jackie Amsden and Katrina Ao
Environmental Youth Alliance

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Abstract

The future of strong local communities, and the rich cultural and natural resources that they steward, lies with youth. Yet, increasingly it is the youth that feel little connection to their home places. One way to address this challenge is through community asset mapping. This research approach offers a way to make youth more aware of and feel more connected to their local cultural and natural environments. Exactly how the community mapping process unfolds takes a different shape in each setting, but the underlying philosophy is always the same: to allow communities, including youth, to express their knowledge and experience in relation to the local environment, and then document that information in some type of creative format. This is what we call a community map. It might represent an aspect of community space or of community values. The Environmental Youth Alliance is currently working with youth to create these community maps on topics like the youth-friendliness of parks and health services in their neighborhoods. Although these research projects are ongoing, their experiences have already produced one positive and important finding: community asset mapping is an exciting and interesting way for youth to gather information, and in the process, youth learn about and gain a sense of ownership of their home places. As such, community asset mapping offers a new way to involve youth in maintaining and building stronger, more sustainable communities.

Introduction

The future of strong local communities and the rich cultural and natural resources that they steward lies with youth. Yet, increasingly youth feel little connection to their home places. One way to encourage youth to see their relationship with their local environment is through community asset mapping, a tool of participatory action research. Community asset mapping is most simply defined by groups getting together and drawing, moulding, writing, or expressing through any other creative means some aspect of local knowledge and experience (Lyndon 2000). Exactly how this happens and what it looks like takes a different shape in each new setting, but the underlying philosophy is always the same: to allow communities to express and share their voices, and to then to somehow document, or record those voices. The end product, which might show the youth-friendliness of a local park or children's ideas on water conservation, is known as a community map.

In this paper, after outlining a brief history of community asset mapping and its strength as a tool of participatory action research, I will describe the experience of the 2002 International Children's Conference on the Environment (ICCE), organized by United Nations Environment Programme with the collaboration of Youth Action Effecting Change, the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement, and the Environmental Youth Alliance. In doing so, I will demonstrate how this methodology was able to engage children to address major resource conservation issues, and in general, begin to define their own role in environmental conservation.

History of Community Asset Mapping

The use of the word 'map' in community asset mapping can be quite confusing to those only familiar with professional, geographical maps (Tupechka 1998). Traditionally, maps only deal with geographic characteristics, like mountain ranges or highways, and everything must be accurately 'to scale' (Tupechka 1998). This is, however, a very narrow view of what maps can really be used for. Community asset mapping uses this tool to recognize all kinds of local meaning, assets, and perspectives—from the environmental values of children to the uses of local parks. There are no 'scientific' rules to follow, and symbols and pictures are created according to nothing more than the ideas, feelings and opinions of whoever is making the maps.

This 're-discovery' of the maps as a tool that anyone can use, that can adopt any kind of perspective, and that can be applied to any kind of knowledge draws upon two new ways that communities and maps are now being seen. The first of these, called bioregionalism, uses maps to describe how the local environment works together as a system, encouraging people to see it from a holistic perspective. Douglas Aberley explains this further, as "an approach...that is based upon identifying the biological ...regions in which groups of communities are rooted" (Aberley 1993). This might be more easily understood by contrasting it with the way European explorers historically used maps: to chart resources for eventual exploitation and domination (Lyndon 2001). Maps, in the newer tradition, encourage people to be more aware of and connected to their home places.



The mapping process facilitates cross-cultural dialogue.

Another way that maps and communities are being brought together is through capacity-focused development. Basically, this just means making mental maps of neighbourhoods that identify assets, capacities and abilities—instead of weaknesses (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993). Usually people think of communities in terms of their needs and problems. This creates a ‘needs map,’ made up of negative images such as joblessness and crime (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993). Fighting against this tide, capacity-focused development identifies community resources and maps them out so they may be built on and strengthened.

Community asset mapping is about reclaiming the powerful research tool of mapmaking, and applying it in these new ways to strengthen communities. The lesson of bioregionalism and capacity-focused development have shown us that these maps can help us see the complex ways that the natural environments we live in are interconnected, and help us see the strengths we possess as communities. All of this information is right in our own backyards, community mapping just give us an opportunity to use it.

Community Asset Mapping and Participatory Action Research

The strength of community asset mapping as a tool to engage youth can best be understood within the tradition of participatory action research, described as the “systematic inquiry with the collaboration of those affected by the issue being studied for the purposes of education and taking action or effecting social change” (IHPR et al. 1995). It is the three central characteristics of participatory, action, and research that define this stream of social science investigation that also define the strengths of community asset mapping.

Community asset mapping is an extremely participatory process. A diverse range of community members are included, and they work together to decide the direction of the process. While this can lead to a very collaborative and inclusive environment, there is also the danger that one part of the group will dominate the research process and some voices will be excluded. If this pitfall is ignored, the research process might actually compromise the community. On the other hand, as long as all voices are heard in this process, community asset mapping can actually help strengthen relationships within this community. For example, some of the work of the Common Ground community mapping project, which offers mapping and learning resources to support community projects, shows how mapping can be used to support cross-generational communication. In the Burnside Gorge Mapping Project community members of all ages were involved in planning the community, a rare and valuable opportunity for kids and seniors to interact (Common Ground 2000). Getting young people to interact and collaborate with each other and those around them strengthens and builds community ties.

Community mapping is also a tool for action. As Douglas Aberley explains in *Boundaries of Home: Mapping for Local Empowerment*, maps can play many important roles in social change by educating participants about unfair situations, by representing and encouraging communities to decide what they want to see change, and by encouraging these communities to organize their resources and plan strategies to achieve this vision (Aberley 1993). The International

Green Maps System ([HYPERLINK "http://www.greenmap.org" www.greenmap.org](http://www.greenmap.org)), which consists of more than 175 worldwide mapping projects (including 29 by young people), includes many maps that express such communities desires. These maps, which document such areas as city spaces, watersheds, bioregions, rural areas, small towns and neighbourhoods, are created to stimulate local awareness of the connections between society and the natural and built environment. This, in turn, is hoped to encourage residents to make more sustainable lifestyle choices and inspire other mapping initiatives (www.greenmap.org). These maps can act as powerful tools to affect social change by and for the youth community.

Finally, community mapping is a research tool that recognizes the value of youth knowledge and offers a way to tap into that knowledge. The flexibility of mapping encourages all kinds of people, despite their differences, to share what they know and feel. In recording that information, the mapping process also respects that knowledge. More importantly, mapping is fun! For example, in the Our Own Backyard: Mapping the Grandview Woodland Community Project, set in Vancouver, BC, a huge number of groups, organizations, school classes, and individuals were involved in producing maps (available in *Journeys through the Neighbourhood: Our Community Atlas*) that represented some aspect of the local neighbourhood. They used a wide variety of materials to compile maps, from photographs, clay, objects, paper, and more. Rather than being stuck with answering a more narrowly defined questionnaire, this diversity allowed community members to express themselves in ways that they were comfortable with—this is the beauty of community mapping

The community asset mapping process may not embody the participatory, action, and research ideals on every occasion. However, having laid this framework, it is now valuable to explore the experiences of the ICCE and be able to actually visualize some of the potential of this tool.

Case Example: International Children's Conference on the Environment (ICCE),

The 2002 ICCE, held in Victoria BC, involved 400 children aged 10-12 yrs from 91 different countries. The objective of the conference was "to increase children's understanding of the environmental issues through sharing experiences and opinions" (icccanada2002.org). In addition to attending a series of workshops and fieldtrips, the children spent part of their time at this conference participating in community asset mapping groups, with facilitators trained by the Environmental Youth Alliance. During these sessions, the children were asked to respond to questions such as: "what is a healthy community?"; "how can we protect the water?"; and "how can we conserve natural resources?"

The daily process of putting thoughts and feelings on paper through a community asset mapping process had many positive outcomes. Through writing and drawing out their thoughts the children had a chance to really digest and interpret what they were learning about, and bounce ideas off one another to get much broader understandings. It also allowed children to bridge communication barriers, because they were able to express themselves in their own language and their own ways—be it picture or words. For children who might have felt previously disconnected or excluded, here was one place they could be themselves and see that their experiences and perspectives were important. Lastly, the mapping was specially designed to be fun—a life necessity for kids. Rainbow markers, lots of talking, giggling, and drawing on big sheets of blank paper were a key combination to engage the children.

As the conference drew to a close, the maps were also used as valuable sources of information with which to articulate the collective voice of the 400 participants. The ideas recorded in the maps were coded by children and grouped into themes. These themes were translated into challenges, specific recommendations for social and environmental action, addressed to leaders and the people of the world. In these challenges, the children had drawn from their collective experiences to produce new and valuable knowledge.

After the conference was over, the knowledge that had been created by the children led to increased awareness and inspired policy commitment from global leaders. Two of the children from the ICCE presented the challenges developed by their peers at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa. Their passion and conviction in sharing the knowledge they had helped create resulted in direct global policy change, as evident in a commitment made by the world leaders in the Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development, to "assume a collective responsibility to advance... sustainable development" (<http://www.johannesburgsummit.org>).



Two ICCE delegates present a map of values and challenges addressing water conservation.

Conclusion

Community asset mapping is a valuable tool for not only youth, but also the communities they reside in. As shown in the case of the ICCE, and other projects undertaken by the Environmental Youth Alliance, community asset mapping is an exciting and interesting way for youth to gather information, and in the process, youth learn about and gain a sense of ownership of their home places. As such, community asset mapping offers a new way to involve youth in maintaining and building stronger, more sustainable communities. To learn about other ways that the Environmental Youth Alliance is mapping community assets, or learn how to conduct your own mapping project, contact Jackie@eya.ca, or visit www.eya.ca.

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